

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to examine the language needs of the front line staff in order for them to be efficient and effective. Interest in this area was sparked off by a comment made by one of the doctors in this MC about the proficiency in English of these front line staff, which hinders the performance of their duties.

Several important issues emerged from the data analysis and findings in chapter four. Most importantly, this chapter will present a summary of the perspectives of the respondents as the prospective learners or participants of an English course (with the aim of designing a learner-centred curriculum). It will also take into consideration the viewpoints of the management who is the sponsor and policy maker in this case and also the teacher, in this case the trainer from the training department. These people will ultimately decide the finer rudiments of the course.

This chapter will present the analysis of the data obtained from observation, the questionnaire and the interviews. The discussion and conclusion should reveal answers to all the research queries. In order to see this study in the right perspective, it is appropriate at this stage to recapitulate the research questions. The research questions presented in this study are:

1. How important is English for these front line staff? If it is important, how viable is it to offer specialised training in communicational skills in English to this group of front line staff?

2. In designing an English Language course for front line staff at a private hospital,
  - (i) what language skills are considered most important?
  - (ii) what sub-skills will be required to enhance their efficiency?
3. What do the front line staff need these language skills for? Are the skills for occupational purposes only or are there any other purposes for learning these skills?
4. Would computerisation limit the skill or lessen the need to learn any of these skills?

### 5.1 Importance of English for These Front Line Staff

It is pertinent that this discussion begins by enumerating, how important English is to these FLS. This discussion will attempt to underline the importance of English in relation to the following issues.

#### 5.1.1 Job Function of the FLS

The obvious and most important reason is the nature of their job. The front line staff deal directly with the patient. They are the patient's first line of contact with the hospital. Therefore, they shoulder the responsibility of enhancing the hospital's professional image. This responsibility is one of the management's requirements of the FLS, which the FLS are aware of. As the research site is a private hospital, customer dissatisfaction would affect the 'profit target' of the organisation. Thus, the FLS are expected to render 'quality' customer service and one way this can be achieved is for the FLS to be equipped with good communicational skills, particularly in English.

The FLS need good communicational skills, particularly in English, because it has been established that the hospital caters largely for English speaking patients from the upper echelon of society (attested by the management and from observations made). Moreover, the hospital also caters for large corporate clients, both local and foreign, who speak English. Thus, there is a 'necessity' for this staff to be proficient in English and it is important to keep in mind that most of the patients who require the services of these FLS are English speaking.

The FLS are aware that their most important duty is to provide efficient and effective customer service. In order to ensure this, it should be stated that they do sometimes resort to other languages like Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese or Tamil. According to the management it is the end result, that is customer satisfaction, which is most important. It was also noted that the management itself emphasises the usage of English. This is obvious, as one of the criteria for selection of these FLS is being conversant in English. However, to carry out their duties, it was observed, that it is sometimes helpful when the FLS are conversant in more than one language.

It is important to highlight that most patients at this hospital are perceptive, observant and sometimes very demanding. They expect to be given efficient service more so because this organisation is a private hospital and they are paying customers. These staff are also required to be very tactful when dealing with the patients. The front line staff also need to extend a certain amount of courtesy to patients who visit these clinics on a regular basis. They have to acknowledge recognition and this would require that they greet the patients appropriately and ask normal courtesy questions of inquiry like 'How are you today, sir?' and so forth. In order to be able to carry out all these responsibilities, these front

liners need to have sufficient language skills to enable them to respond to the various situations they encounter daily in the most appropriate and efficient way.

Their duties also (as listed in Chapter 4) require them to communicate with a large number of patients or customers both internally, within the hospital (the patients/customers who come directly to their counters) and externally (the corporate clients that they need to contact by telephone or fax). Figures 4.1; 4.6; 4.7 and 4.9 illustrate the large discourse community that the FLS work with or communicate with. Tact and efficiency are very important when dealing with patients and corporate clients as any communicational flaw could result in them taking their business elsewhere. They also need to communicate within the organisation with colleagues, from both the administrative as well as the medical departments. Proper understanding and communication will ensure that their duties are not hindered. This makes it very pertinent that these staff have the language skills to enable them to carry out their duties.

Since they cater to a large number of people they also need to be able to perform their task efficiently and quickly. In their position, time is crucial and patients' expectations too are high. This means that they need to be able to communicate with the different people in the course of the duties as efficiently as possible. Proficiency in the language will enable the staff to elicit all the necessary information from the patients as quickly as possible. Efficacy is, therefore, crucial to the front line staff so as not to have any backlog of patients and one way to achieve this is for the FLS to be proficient in their language skills.

### 5.1.2. The Medium of Communication at the Organisation

English is important because it is the *lingua franca* of the organisation. The researcher noted that English is widely used in every department at the hospital. One of the reasons why English is widely used in this hospital is because the hospital has adopted an American management style since its inception. The Human Resources Administrator and the Training and Development Manager attested to this. They stated that all internal correspondence is in English. Meetings, directives both verbal and written, announcements, training courses, notices, for example, are all in English. The only communication, which is not in English, is the governmental correspondence.

Since all communication (both internal and external) in the hospital is in English, and one of the characteristics for identification as part of a discourse community is to follow the norm of the said community (Gee, 199:143), it is pertinent that the staff are proficient in English.

### 5.1.3. Staff Evaluation and Remuneration

It was noted that the staff in the hospital are evaluated regularly. One of the ways staff evaluation is done is based on customers' responses to a feedback survey questionnaire (see Appendix F). The customers are encouraged to respond to this questionnaire during every visit or stay at the hospital. According to the Human Resources Administrator, since the FLS need English to enable them to serve the customers efficiently and effectively, proficiency in the language is considered crucial to attain good evaluation. According to the Support Service Assistant Administrator, the management take these

responses very seriously, especially customer dissatisfaction. Every complaint and acknowledgement of good service is taken into account. Complaints are dealt with immediately and the customer is informed of the rectification either by telephone or written correspondence. The evaluation is done using a points system and the FLS whose names are mentioned favourably by customers in their feedback response survey would be recognised for their excellence.

This is one of the criteria for career advancement in the organisation. One of the remunerations for recognition of excellence is promotion. These staff can be promoted horizontally, that is within their job designation to an area with more responsibilities; or vertically that is to a job of a higher rank, for example from an OA to a CA. This factor should be motivation for the staff to be proficient in their language abilities.

## 5.2. Viability of Offering Specialised Training in Communicational Skills

The discussion above underlines why English is important to the FLS. The study also shows that a large percentage of the respondents (refer to table 4.2) feel that their proficiency level in English is only 'fair'. The respondents themselves feel that there is a need to improve their English. The data itself reveals that there is a 'perceived need' for an English Language course since the majority of the front line staff (this staff are representative of the front line staff of the organisation) are not proficient in the language. It was learnt that a lot of their English language abilities are learnt on the job. The respondents felt (when they were interviewed) that even though they could cope with their daily tasks, they were not able to do their task efficiently with ease and confidence

because they were not proficient in the language. Some of them felt that they “struggle” and “stammer” with English Language in the course of their work.

Most of the respondents only used English at the workplace which adds to the difficulty of improving the language. However, looking at it from another point of view the advantage in this situation is that the respondents have to use English while they are working. The theory of immersion is important here because at least in their workplace the respondents are forced to use English since they are immersed in an environment where English is used most frequently. The respondents in this situation are unlike some learners who only learn English during class hours but have no avenue for practising it. The work place would be an excellent practice ground which would make a ‘relevant’ course in English more successful. The word ‘relevant’ is used because the course designed, needs to take into consideration other criteria which would be discussed later.

Another factor to support the contention that it is viable to offer an English course at the hospital is because of the frequency of English usage (see Table 4.3). English is undeniably the medium of communication at the hospital. The staff would need to be proficient in their language abilities to enable them to render ‘quality service’. In order to render quality service as documented in the company’s mission, vision and quality policy, one area that needs to be considered would be the development and training of the staff in order to maintain or improve the quality already achieved. Looking at it from a larger context this would indirectly also be in line with the VISION that the country is trying to achieve.

It is therefore confirmed that it is viable to offer specialised training in communicational skills to the FLS. The study shows that there is a 'necessity', the management emphasises that English is important and the FLS need to be proficient in the language. The FLS themselves feel that there is a 'necessity' and a 'want' to improve their English to enable them to carry out their duties efficiently. The research also revealed that many of the FLS 'lack' the necessary skill to be able to carry out their duties in the most effective, efficient and appropriate manner.

### 5.3. Important Language Skills

The study revealed that all four language skills are considered important. However, the study indicates that, based on the learners' perspective, some skills take a higher degree of importance compared with the others. The data obtained from the responses to the questions in the questionnaire about the staffs' perspective of English requirement listed the skills according to a descending order of importance starting with speaking, listening, reading and writing (Table 4.6). Grammar of the language is also considered important. As stated in chapter 2, it has not been established which skills are considered most important to enable communication. The following discussion will undertake to list the importance of each of the skills according to the learner's perspective. It is important to consider the learner's perspective because the aim of the research is to enable the designing of a learner-centred course.



### 5.3.1. Speaking and Listening as Important Skills

The study reveals that speaking is achieved through two main modes that is speaking face to face and speaking on the telephone. Speaking is quite clearly the most important skill that this group of front liners have to master. The management (during the interview), the students' response to questionnaire and observation of the language used corroborate this need. Since the FLS deal directly with the patients and the medium of communication appropriate for achieving this is speaking, course designers should take this into consideration. The respondents also felt that to improve their speaking some sub skills, as stated in Table 4.7 are also important. The respondents felt that ability to use the correct vocabulary, grammar and the ability to pronounce words correctly are essential sub skills that need to be learnt to be able to speak well.

The observation and data on language used clearly indicates that the front line staff need not be overly concerned about grammatical accuracy but functional efficiency. Most of the communication among the front line staff in this hospital is formulaic. Svendsen and Krebs (1984) findings of language required for entry-level jobs support the findings of this study. Their findings too were similar to the findings of this study that is the respondents needed simple repeated patterns, which are within the capacity of the respondents. It was felt that their tasks could be carried out with knowledge of these basic formulaic structures. However, to improve their efficiency and effectiveness these staff would have to learn a much wider range of structures as indicated in tables 4.12, 4.13, 4.14, 4.16, 4.17, 4.18, 4.20, 4.21, 4.22, 4.24 and 4.27. Swales (1990) moves analysis technique offers a vast variety and accurate description of the language used. These samples (refer to data overview of language used pertinent to each group) of some

of the typical language used are essentially the common structures that the respondents need to master. There are other structures that the FLS would have to know in relation to the various situations and people that they come in contact with. Other situations which the FLS need to cope with is explaining the terms and conditions, for example as in the admission and discharge information and the MC's hospital room charges which are given to the patients (as in Appendix F). Therefore, the FLS should be very proficient in their speaking. Although the respondents are aware of the fact that their speaking is mostly 'routine', during the informal interview they voiced their worry of trying to cope with unusual situations.

Another area of speaking which is important is "small talk". The Assistant Administrator of the Support Services felt that there is a need to teach the front line staff speaking skills to enable them to engage in small talk while performing their duties. This she felt was necessary for front line staff from the support services but this idea could be considered for the rest of the front liners as well. An example of a situation cited by her is when the FLS from concierge are moving patients from one place to another place, they could engage in small talk in a situation like this. These staff do engage in small talk but she felt that if they were going to do it then it has to adhere to language accurateness and appropriateness. The concierge stated that they do sometimes engage in small talk normally about general topics, for example inquiring about the condition of the patient. Therefore, they also felt that they would be more confident if they were more proficient in English. At the same time the staff need to be aware too that sometimes the patient might not want to engage in any talk.

Another skill, which was categorised as important, is listening. The data in Table 4.8 show that speaking and listening are the forms of communication most frequently used. As speaking and listening are concomitant it is best that they be studied together. Listening too can be studied in relation to its two modes of usage that is face to face and listening on the telephone. A lot of communication is done through the telephone. Both speaking and listening employ different strategies appropriate to the mode of communication, whether it is face to face or through the telephone. Thus, staff should be made aware of some of these strategies.

One research, which highlights this, is Candlin (1976) in his research on doctors' interaction. He states the concept of 'transmediation' that is signals that the listener is paying attention while doing something else. The front liners should also be taught this skill especially since a lot of times they are constantly referring to their computers or writing while dealing with patients. This study did not make any allowance for this strategy but the course designers need to be aware of it.

### 5.3.2. Reading

Reading is not rated as a very important skill to carry out the duties of the FLS (Table 4.6). In dealing with patients the respondents do not need to do much reading. From observation it was noted that the only reading the respondents do while at their task is reading to verify the guarantee letters. They also read notes and messages left by their peers in the course of their duties. They need to read about the terms and conditions for admission and discharge and room charges etc. but these would have been done by them when they begun their job. During the interview, the researcher was informed that they

need to learn to read circulars and notices which are in English. Sometimes the respondents cannot understand these circulars and notices because of their 'lack' of language skills. If the notices or circulars are important, they normally learn the contents of these items when their immediate superior explains it to them. They would however like to be able to read other materials which are not job related. This is not a 'necessity' in terms of their duties but a 'want'. The course designers need to be aware of this in order to motivate these learners. However, it is practical that the respondents are taught simple basic reading strategies like skimming and scanning, which they can apply when they want to read any reading materials which they feel is useful.

### 5.3.3. Grammar

The respondents listed this as important because grammar is important to be able to communicate correctly. From observation it was found that these respondents managed quite well to get their message across even though there were grammatical flaws. It is felt that grammar should not be stressed but the students can be made aware of certain grammatical rules that might be useful to improve the formulaic structures that they use.

It has been found that with adult learners (Savignon, 1972; discussed in chapter 2) a certain amount of emphasis needs to be given to grammar. Researchers also feel that language learners of a specific group should be taught grammatical items which the learners need to communicate effectively.

#### 5.3.4. Writing

Writing skills is used minimally and this is true for all the other front line staff in this organisation. Since the whole organisation has an effective on-line computerised system, the front line staff only need to key in stipulated codes into the appropriate software. Most information is stored in standard computer software programmes, which are specifically written for the hospital. These programmes are written in English. Programmes like 'Visit Management' gives all the information concerning appointments. These programmes are also on-line with other departments. This eases the duties of the front liners in that the task of relaying information is made more simple and accurate. Similarly the information which the front liners request for can also be relayed quickly and accurately. The only writing they do at work is when they write messages, memos and short notes. Some of the respondents write letters but only once a month.

In conclusion, this study reveals that a language course for this group of FLS should emphasise speaking and listening skills and its corresponding sub skills. Some examples of the sub skills needed are stated in Table 4.9. This is because of the frequency of usage of these two skills. The FLS need to know some basic reading skills, which they need to enable them to accomplish certain reading tasks (some examples of the reading tasks are stated in Table 4.9). It has been established that the teaching of grammar should be limited to items which are more job-specific. The FLS need not be taught writing skills since there is very limited writing required to carry out their tasks.

#### 5.4. Purpose of Language

The next research question that needs clarification is the purpose for learning the language. This study reveals that the language needs of the front line staff are essentially for occupational purpose. The study revealed that outside the hospital, the use of English is almost negligible. Therefore the course designers would only need to concentrate on the types of language used at work.

#### 5.5. Computerisation- Is It Delimiting?

This is the last research query. The study shows that computerisation does not limit the skills or lessen the need to learn any of the language skills. The only skill that it has reduced, in terms of importance and frequency of usage, is the writing skill. With the advent of a paperless society writing might not be in vogue anymore. It was found that the respondents could work very efficiently without writing skills. In fact with computerisation, the researcher feels that the other skills rise in their degree of importance. Since this is a service provider, computers are undeniably necessary to simplify the processes in many areas in the hospital and at the same time enable the tasks to be completed in a shorter time. Computers are very useful in many areas in this hospital for instance for locating information about patients, for billing procedures, to fix appointments schedules etc. One example of a situation when computers can definitely do the task more efficiently and much faster is in an event when the patient wants to see two doctors on the same day. The on-line computer software programmes enables the FLS to schedule the two appointments accurately with ease and speed.

But what is vital in a service industry is still the human factor. The FLS still need to be proficient in the various language skills mentioned in the preceding discussions, to relay the information to the patients and to listen to the patients' response.

#### 5.6. Implication for Course Design

This research which is based on needs analysis with an ethnographic orientation displays some of the consideration necessary as a pre-empt to course design. Primarily, is the concept that it should consider the needs of the learner. A course design that is learner centred should be more successful than a teacher centred design. What the sponsors need to realise is that the students do the learning and therefore what they perceive as important will motivate them to engage in the learning process.

It is recommended that the course should be completely job related because there are no evident reasons for a course design to concentrate on any other situation or purpose. Therefore the "relevant" course should include *use* and *usage* of the language that is job specific.. Since English is needed only for occupational purposes the course designer should consider items related to the tasks that the front line staff need to accomplish. It is suggested that ideally 'a functional communicational course' should be conducted. The course designer could itemise the different functions that the language is used for and design the course accordingly. The research has revealed a variety of discourses that is task specific. It has samples of patterns of communication that is derived from authentic use of the language.

Another suggestion is that the students are grouped according to their competence. The concierge staff, during the interview revealed that they would rather have a course which is meant for them exclusively. This was because they felt that their level of competency (many of them have only SRP qualification) was not as high as the others and when they attend a course with the rest of the front line staff they do not feel comfortable. These considerations are important to ensure the success of the course.

The course designer should also bear in mind that the learners are adult learners with their own idiosyncrasies. Some of the reasons for this consideration has been stated in chapter 2 (Nunan, 1988).

The research revealed that the learners have their own preferences for how the course should be run. The learners would prefer more activities and topics related to their job, more emphasis on listening and speaking and General English to be able to do simple activities necessary within daily situations at work.

A course adopting the findings revealed in this research that is run concurrently with the existing Positive Communication Course conducted at the MC would produce a group of very effective and efficient front line staff.

### 5.7.Limitations of the Study

One of the main limitations of this study is time constraint. The collection of data for this study had to be done within two weeks due to changes in administrative policy within the MC, which did not give ample time for a very thorough investigation of the language



needs of the FLS. The researcher only managed to get data of language used for typical situations the FLS needed to cope with. It would have been more complete if the researcher had data about the many unusual situations that arise in a large organisation such as the MC.

Another inadequacy of this research is that it does not examine the attitude of the learners towards English. It is important to be clear about the attitude of the learners towards English to ensure that the course is successful. The research highlights that there are numerous 'push factors', one of which is that English is important to perform their task effectively and efficiently. However, this might not be enough to ensure a long-term dedication to an English course.

This study did not consider other 'constraints' within the organisation which could hinder the smooth running of a course. A researcher should study constraints like appropriate time for the course to be conducted. This is important because these staff work on shifts. It would also be helpful if the researcher had information about other infrastructure needed (for example, whether there are enough staff trained to teach language per say) to conduct an English course.

The researcher should have interviewed more informants viz. the front liners' immediate superiors, the consultants the FLS work for and the patients. This could have allowed for increased accuracy in the data collected. The data from the FLS's immediate superiors for instance, could corroborate information about the job functions of the front line staff. This would have allowed the researcher to categorise the language used for each function explicitly.

Another limitation of this study is that although the hospital has a large population of front liners, it concentrated on only the front line staff in particular areas. The study would have been more representative if there was a larger group of front liners, for instance the people who the customers do not see that often like the telephonists etc.

#### 5.8. Suggestion for Further Research

Since one of the limitations is that the FLS in this study encompassed only FLS from particular areas, it would seem appropriate to conduct this kind of research by studying FLS from all the different areas where they are employed. The other group of front liners include the telephone operators, the staff from the catering services who go from room to room to serve food to the 'in-patients', and other front line staff who mainly deal with in-patients. Essentially for this study to be more reliable and valid it should encompass all the different groups of FLS who render service to the customers.

Ideally a study of this nature should be conducted for a longer time period. A study of this nature could also be done where the observer is a participant observer. A participant observer might be able to give more precise data on language used and its corresponding functions.

In conclusion, it is hoped that the findings of this research will enable the course designers to concentrate on the pertinent areas of language in order to design a course which is learner-centred and motivating to the learners.